

# A Contrarian Approach to Managing Maintenance

Ten years in the Chinese industrial maintenance market have led Bruno Lhopiteau to observe that most MNCs face the same maintenance issues – and most try to apply standard western solutions.

“China is different.” I could not resist using the secret weapon of Chinese argumentation. As far as maintenance is concerned, it is true that China offers endless astonishment to freshly-arrived overseas professionals. Due to the country’s development pace, priority is usually given to new investments, JV negotiations and the construction of new plants. Maintenance is a long-term concern, too often ignored at the investment stage.

Economic realities and MNCs themselves are to blame for this situation. We find that the basic concept of modern maintenance management – preventive maintenance, the practice to maintain equipment before it breaks down – is known in theory, but is far from being assimilated into practice. Back home, this concept is second nature to every new engineering graduate. Additionally, local engineers are often over-specialised and, hence, lack the cross-disciplinary overview needed to manage maintenance. I could also mention that fraudulent spare-parts procurement practices are commonplace, although managers, locals and foreigners alike, often chose to ignore this.

Given these circumstances, the not-so-unexpected effects appear after a few years of operation – when poorly maintained equipment starts to break down and no maintenance record exists in a reliable or exploitable form. Only then, will the plant’s general manager start to worry about the abysmally low plant utilisation (just when business volume is up and full capacity is needed), indirect costs of downtime (perhaps resulting in loss of business), out-of-control maintenance costs and the impossibility of accurately auditing the situation (no recording system is often in place). At this stage, recovery measures become very costly.

On the bright side, Chinese engineers often surpass their western counterparts in key areas, such as the easy acceptance of computerisation in their work environment (the motivational factor prevails over the fear of being ‘monitored’) and a willingness to acquire new skills.

## Western Wisdom at Work

Time and again, expat managers apply the proven recipe of auditing (several times is better than once), training (bring on the expensive foreign consultant), organise (and reorganise, and again) and, envisioned as a last, final step, the computerisation of maintenance management. “You shall organise before you computerise” is one of the greatest commandments delivered unto western engineers, and it does indeed make a lot of sense.

This approach however meets many problems in China. Nobody likes being audited, having their nose rubbed into their mistakes in front of others, especially by someone who “doesn’t know China.” Training is more than welcome but it takes time to inculcate fundamental concepts of preventive maintenance to engineers who already have several years of experience, while younger engineers also need time to gain maturity. It’s an excellent approach, but it will help five years later, not now.

In the meantime, any reasonably good maintenance manager will have been poached by your competitor next door at double his current salary. At some point of time, an expensive computerised system is introduced, which, after several months of intense efforts with an IT consultant, fails miserably to be used at all. All this while, employees have lost their enthusiasm, as the improvement plans have delivered very little concrete result. And it has not even been fun.

## A Contrarian Approach

I advocate nothing less than the complete opposite. In a nutshell, we have found that implementing a proper maintenance strategy, including preventive maintenance, ‘on paper’ is going to be very difficult. However, putting together, as the first step, a computerised management system will achieve most of your goals – help structure the company, provide guidelines and tools to build up a historical record of maintenance and allow auditing and decision support. The ‘concrete’ aspect of such a system acts as a catalyst to the organisation, allowing it to shortcut many of the more conceptual steps. Fine-tuning can be performed later, when the basics are in place.

Using this approach, small but tangible results can be achieved in a matter of weeks, helping your staff acquire good habits and to understand, in practice, the concepts of modern maintenance. Your management team has a basic audit tool in place, enabling it to make improvement decisions. The rest will all be derived from that.

This is by no means a one-size-fits-all solution, but you get the idea. Now, go and impress your board members by proposing upside-down, contrarian solutions to your everyday problems. And, remember, the “China is different” catchphrase comes in handy. □

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